

Theology on the Web.org.uk

Making Biblical Scholarship Accessible

This document was supplied for free educational purposes. Unless it is in the public domain, it may not be sold for profit or hosted on a webserver without the permission of the copyright holder.

If you find it of help to you and would like to support the ministry of Theology on the Web, please consider using the links below:



Buy me a coffee

<https://www.buymeacoffee.com/theology>



PATREON

<https://patreon.com/theologyontheweb>

PayPal

<https://paypal.me/robbradshaw>

A table of contents for *The Expositor* can be found here:

https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_expositor-series-1.php

The Creed does not go so far as to give utterance to the second and third of these thoughts, and it is far from exalting the phantasies of pious curiosity into a creed. It contents itself with bearing witness to the fact, as it does with reference to the Death on the cross and the Resurrection. Otherwise Jesus would not have truly died nor have suffered the death of the men whom He would and should redeem. The faith of Christians will not give up this confession. Every teacher can easily overcome the difficulty which the German translation "hell" causes to the young and ignorant, who, misled by the present use of the word, think of the place of perdition. He has to do much the same in many passages when he reads the Bible with the young and ignorant.

THEOD. ZAHN.

DID JOHN PREACH BAPTISM FOR THE
REMISSION OF SINS?

THE burden of John the Baptist's preaching, as recorded in the Gospels of S. Mark and S. Luke, presents to us a problem almost as puzzling as the question regarding it which was put by our Lord to the chief priests, the scribes, and the elders: "Was it from heaven or of men?" (Mark xi. 30; Luke xx. 4); and although we do not fear the same dire consequences to ourselves should we make a mistake in its solution, the result of such a mistake may be even more disastrous to the interests of struggling humanity. The problem to which we refer is this: John preached "the baptism of repentance unto remission of sins," *βάπτισμα μετανοίας εἰς ἄφεσιν ἁμαρτιῶν*. Is the phrase *εἰς ἄφεσιν ἁμαρτιῶν*, "unto remission of sins," logically and grammatically dependent on the word *βάπτισμα*, "baptism," or on the word *μετανοίας*, "of repentance"?

The three hundred and eighteen Fathers who sat in the Council of Nice gave a decided answer to this question when they left out the word *μετανοίας*, "of repentance," altogether in their famous Creed—a Creed accepted up to the present day by almost all Christian Churches. *Ὁμολογῶ ἐν βάπτισμα εἰς ἄφεσιν ἁμαρτιῶν*, "I acknowledge one baptism for the remission of sins," was their summary of New Testament teaching on the subject.

But were they justified in so doing? The English Authorized Version says "for the remission of sins," and the Revised Version, "unto remission of sins." They both preserve the ambiguity of the Greek in its full force; for in this passage they are both accurate as to grammatical form and as to sense. We cannot therefore be wrong in arguing from them.

It will be conceded that baptism and repentance are not precisely the same thing, because the one may very well exist without the other. Infants, being unconscious, and not having yet committed actual sin, do not repent on the occasion of their baptism, yet the rite is perfectly valid as the symbol of their admission to the Church of Christ. On the other hand, it is quite conceivable that a man may repent of some evil deed—nay, of the whole tenor of his life—without submitting to the rite of baptism. A case may even be imagined where he would be perfectly guiltless of neglecting our Lord's injunction by so doing, as there might be no one at hand who considered himself qualified to administer the rite.

Baptism and repentance then, being two perfectly distinct ideas, whose conjunction in the Gospel narrative is due to a relationship of expediency or affinity rather than to one of inherent necessity—which of them is efficacious, according to John's preaching, for the purpose of obtaining the remission of sins? One or other it must be; and we hold that the claim of the one excludes that of the other,

for it would be a most unusual grammatical construction to make the phrase "for the remission of sins" dependent on both of two words, each of which represents a perfectly distinct idea. If the governing word be "baptism," then it is not "repentance," and *vice versâ*.

Here grammar gives us no help. According to its rules, whether in Greek or in English, either "baptism" or "repentance" may have the remission of sins for its effect.

Now which did John, which did the two Evangelists who record the fact of his using the phrase, actually mean?

Grammar having failed us, we fall back on the axiom that a theoretical idea may be judged by its effects when put into practice, just as a tree is known by its fruits.

Has baptism been efficacious for the remission of sins? Here the statistics elude our grasp, the number of the baptized being almost equivalent to the number of the population of Christian countries during nineteen centuries, certainly to the population of Europe during the last millennium. Have the members of this vast multitude all enjoyed the remission of their sins? Some of them have died on the gallows, some of them have reached the lowest depths of debauchery, some have been thieves, swindlers, and assassins. Beautiful as the rite of baptism may be when regarded as a symbol of soul cleansing, it has had no appreciable effect whatever on their life and conversation.

It will be said, however, that the remission which is supposed to be effected by its means applies only to sins, or to sinful dispositions, that are past, and has no reference whatever to those that are to be in the future. But does not this idea so limit the scope of God's forgiveness as to make it almost practically worthless? It was surely to achieve a much higher result that He gave His Son as a sacrifice. With Him forgiveness, made possible at so great a cost, must mean deliverance from the power

or dominion of sin as well as from its guilt. It must be accompanied by a resolve on the part of the recipient to forsake sin ; in other words, by repentance.

Is not this idea of forsaking implied in the word *ἄφεσις*? It means, we know, "acquittal," from the word *ἀφίημι*, "to acquit" (a slave, for instance). But Liddell and Scott tell us that *ἀφίημι* is used also in the sense of "to forsake" (*γυναῖκα*, "a wife," *ὀργήν*, "wrath"). Is it quite impossible to read, "The baptism of repentance for the forsaking of sins"? We have a strong suspicion that this kind of *ἄφεσις* was not altogether absent from the Baptist's mind as he preached, and it might be interpreted as the *μετάνοια εἰς σωτηρίαν ἀμεταμέλητον* which S. Paul speaks of in 2 Corinthians vii. 10. We may even presume to say that the *ἄφεσις* in the sense of "forsaking" is the only sure proof that we have received the *ἄφεσις* in the sense of "acquittal."

If we turn for some light on the meaning of the word *ἄφεσις* to the early versions of the Gospels, we find that both the Old Latin and the Vulgate give us simply *remission* or *remision*. But the Syriac versions have all *shubqan* or *shubqana*, which, though continually employed in the sense of remission, is yet a regularly formed noun from the verb *shbaq*, whose common meaning is "to forsake," and which had certainly no other when it was used by our Lord on the cross.

Is repentance efficacious for the remission of sins? Repentance has been called a "saving grace"; and though the New Testament teaches that it is not the actual ground of a sinner's acceptance with God, it is, when sincere, an indispensable accompaniment of that acceptance. The Almighty Himself cannot pardon without it. This is in the nature of things, for repentance simply means "a turning from something to something," in this case from sin unto God. It was lately described by a drill-sergeant

as "Right about face," and is still more happily rendered by our common expression, "Turn over a new leaf."

Seeing then that there cannot be remission of sins without repentance, and that true repentance never occurs without the remission of sins (Luke xiii. 3; Acts iii. 19; it was repentance for which Esau found no place), is it not natural to conclude that in Mark i. 4 and in Luke iii. 3 the phrase "for the remission of sins" is logically and grammatically dependent on the word "repentance" and not on the word "baptism," and that, consequently, we must regard the confession in the Nicene Creed, "I acknowledge one baptism for the remission of sins," so far as it is based on New Testament teaching, to be either mutilated or incomplete? It would be interesting to know what considerations induced the imperial and reverend compilers of that confession to omit all mention of repentance.

AGNES SMITH LEWIS.

SURVEY OF LITERATURE ON THE NEW TESTAMENT.

INTRODUCTION.—To the series of "Old Latin Biblical Texts" issued from the Clarendon Press the Rev. Henry J. White adds No. IV. It contains *Portions of the Acts of the Apostles, of the Epistle of St. James, and of the First Epistle of St. Peter, from the Bobbio Palimpsest(s), now numbered Cod. 16 in the Imperial Library at Vienna.* This Palimpsest has previously been edited by Tischendorf and Belsheim, to both of whom, and especially to the former, Mr. White makes abundant acknowledgment of his indebtedness. His examination of the MS. confirms the impression of Tischendorf's remarkable skill in deciphering what to almost every other eye is illegible. Mr. White himself must be congratulated on the success with which he has carried the deciphering of the MS. somewhat further. The facsimile given of its *easiest* page enables one in some degree to estimate the difficulty of his task. One can